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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000493

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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR AMBASSADOR
JOHN HANFORD, NEA/ARP AND INR/B; PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR
TSOU

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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC SCHOLAR CALLS FOR INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL
DIALOGUE

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: PolOff held a productive discussion about
Islam and the need for greater dialogue with Dr. Hamid
Al-Rifaie, an internationally recognized religious scholar
who lives in Jeddah. He said that he is focused on opening
stable channels of communication that allow Muslims to talk
among themselves and present a more coherent international
message while also finding ways for other nations and
governments to participate in the discussion. He said that
he hopes organizations such as his can work with US officials
to find better ways to communicate an anti-terrorist message.

Al-Rifaie then provided a draft copy of a proposal created
by people he referred to as the "Group of 100 Muslims," who
are prominent international Islamic thinkers that are working
to create a more structured way for Muslims to think through
the priorities of their beliefs and then to live within that
framework. END SUMMARY.

A DESIRE FOR MORE COOPERATION

12. (SBU) On July 3, PolOff met with Dr. Hamid bin Ahmad
((AL-RIFAIE)), an outspoken religious scholar who is
president of the International Islamic Forum For Dialogue
(IIFD) and assistant secretary general of the Muslim World
Congress. Al-Rifaie began by lamenting that he has been
waiting for more consistent interaction with the United
States for a long time. He said that over the past 5 years
he has met repeatedly with US diplomats posted in Jeddah and
visiting from Washington, but that he has never received
feedback on how to better facilitate dialogue. He said that
his main goal is to open stable channels for communication,
adding that he hopes that Washington would assign a "stable
committee" that can work with the IIFD to open an ongoing
dialogue about Islam, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

13. (U) Al-Rifaie, who has written 24 books on various
aspects of Islam and international relations, stressed that
he sees Islam as sharing common ground with many other
religions, naming Christianity and Judaism, in particular.
He added that Jews and Muslims are "religious brothers"
because they share similar roots, noting that he objects to
Zionism because it is a political distortion of the faith.
Al-Rifaie also said that, regardless of our different faiths,
terrorism is a problem Saudi Arabia and the United States

must deal with. He said that he hopes groups such as the IIFD can work with US officials to find better ways to communicate an anti-terrorist message.

OVERVIEW OF PROPOSAL FROM "GROUP OF 100 MUSLIMS"

14. (SBU) When asked about how Islam can be better understood, Al-Rifaie said that there must be more dialogue within the faith in order to present a more coherent message to non-Muslims. He outlined the goals of a group he leads called the "Group of 100 Muslims," which includes many prominent figures including fellow Hejazi scholar Sami Angawi and HRH Prince Al Hassan bin Talal of Jordan. Made up of 100 prominent Islamic scholars and religious thinkers from across the Arab World, the Group is creating a plan that Al-Rifaie hopes will serve as a scholarly road map for Muslims to think about the core values of their faith and then to consider how to best explain those beliefs and practices to others.

15. (SBU) Al-Rifaie provided PolOff with a draft copy of the proposal that is being developed by the Group of 100 Muslims, which he hopes will be released to the public in Fall 2006. The proposal begins with a call to Muslims to consider questions such as "Who are we?" and then to evaluate what sort of relationship they desire with other Muslims and with people of other faiths. He explained that this portion of the proposal is aimed at sparking an internal dialogue that can address the variations within Islam that are often misunderstood by non-Muslims.

16. (SBU) The second portion of the draft message is based on Al-Rifaie's idea that Islam strives to both enhance the spirit and to be a framework for living a better life, which he refers to as "constructional religion." He explained that to live an Islam-focused lifestyle, Muslims need to do a

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better job of remembering that peace is the "base of relationship" for all people. He added that concepts such as the "oneness of the source of religions," the "unity of the human family," "justice for all," and preserving the environment should also factor into how Muslims treat all people, not just other members of their faith.

17. (C) COMMENT: While Al-Rifaie is clearly a very learned Islamic scholar with contacts all over the world, he comes across as more focused on exploring the intellectual realm of Islam than in creating practical plans to solve religious-based conflict. Nevertheless, Al-Rifaie's accessibility and broad international connections give him a window into grassroots movements in Islam and could enable him to serve as a catalyst for debate, even within the increasingly conservative religious system in Saudi Arabia. END COMMENT.

BIO NOTE

18. (U) Al-Rifaie, whose title is listed as "Prof. Dr." on his curriculum vitae, is a scientist as well as religious thinker. He holds a bachelor of science degree in chemistry and geology from a university in Damascus, master of science degrees in industrial organic chemistry from Al-Azhar University in Egypt and from Surry University in the United Kingdom, and a Ph.D. in organic chemistry from Al-Cairo University in Egypt. He has taught chemistry at King AbdulAziz University in Jeddah. Al-Rifaie has served on the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Coordinating Committee for Islamic Da'wah Acts, and been a member of the International Islamic Charitable Foundation, the International Islamic Foundation in the World, the International Islamic Council for Da'wah and Relief, and the International Islamic Committee for Information (IICI).

19. (U) He is a former Secretary-General of the

Islamic-Catholic Liaison Committee, which is a partnership formed with the Vatican, and he has drafted several joint letters with Vatican officials that were sent to prominent world leaders, including the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. He is very proud of his past interactions with high-level officials from around the world and makes a point of working into the conversation the names of leaders and influential people he has met with. Al-Rifaie is married and has at least three children. He appears to be in his late 40s or early 50s and speaks good English.

Gfoeller